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Western Europe-United States: Differences over Policy toward  
Libya Highlight Deeper Splits within the Alliance

Introduction

The US strike against Libya on 15 April sparked as much disapproval in Western Europe as it did support in the United States--highlighting not only a tactical difference in perspective on the two sides of the Atlantic toward the terrorist problem, but also a slowly growing divergence of views on the fundamental nature of the Alliance. [ ]

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West European leaders agree, of course, that NATO's core purpose is to defend against the Soviets, and they generally recognize that they get far more from the United States than they give in pursuit of that goal. Their slowness to help the US in the fight against Libyan terrorism suggests, however, that they tend to accept that asymmetry without feeling a strong corresponding obligation to stand behind the leader of the Alliance when it attempts to uphold Western interests outside of the NATO area. [ ]

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Alliance solidarity fostered by the threats of a Soviet military attack in Central Europe is weakening as that threat recedes in West European eyes and the new Soviet leadership makes apparent headway in its efforts to encourage their drift into complacency. Although the Soviets have continued directly and by

This memorandum [ ] reflects a line of analysis developed during exchanges among members of the EURA Libya Working Group, [ ]

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[ ] Some of the conclusions are admittedly speculative, and we encourage comments from our readers. Questions and comments may be addressed to [ ] Chief, West European Division, [ ].

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proxy to challenge Western interests in other parts of the world, the West Europeans have not reacted as strongly to threats that do not involve them directly. As a result, Washington's efforts to defend US and Western interests against challenges from outside the NATO area have attracted little support across the Atlantic; rather, they have tended to feed West European fears that needless US activism could lead them into dangerous conflicts. [REDACTED]

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These fears, along with the West Europeans' perception that they are entitled to continue benefitting from an unbalanced security relationship, are likely to increase strains within the Alliance. Already, it is fashionable among many educated West Europeans, for example, to see their continent caught between two "superpowers" which, if not morally equivalent, at least pose nearly equal threats to their peace and well-being. This situation provides the Soviets with a standing opportunity to fan transatlantic estrangement by promoting future out-of-area crises. [REDACTED]

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Although each out-of-area crisis will have different implications, we believe that the Libyan episode provided glimpses into a developing split within the Alliance that could reappear more and more frequently. The full dimension and ultimate potential of the problem was only briefly in view because West European leaders--alarmed by the strong anti-American upsurge and parallel anti-European upsurge in the United States after 15 April--tried to smooth over differences with Washington about how to respond to Libyan support for terrorism. We believe that the limited measures taken by the EC and endorsed at the Economic Summit in Tokyo should be seen more as an attempt to close the transatlantic breach and deter Washington from further military action than as an acknowledgement that Western Europe has a responsibility to fight the international menace of state-sponsored terrorism. [REDACTED]

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The Alliance has been shaken by disagreements many times before, but we believe the recent transatlantic tensions highlight some basic differences that have evolved slowly over the years. In the first section of this paper, we address the process of transatlantic estrangement that has been brought to light by the Libyan affair and assess the divergence in interests and world views between the United States and Western Europe. In the second part, we examine how this divergence in basic outlook reinforced the more specific tactical reservations that West Europeans had concerning US policy toward Libya and what this may mean for their willingness to cooperate with the United States on terrorism and other issues. [REDACTED]

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### Differences in Perception and Analysis of the Terrorist Problem

As masters of former colonial empires, the West Europeans believe they have a privileged insight into the interaction between relatively developed and less developed societies, and they see at least the surge in Islamic fundamentalist terrorism--especially that flowing from Hizballah and Iran--in this light. This perspective inclines them to take a long view and to believe that there is little they can do about some aspects of the international terrorism. As they see it, the West has little choice except to wait until the most atavistic parts of the Middle East have made their peace psychologically with the modern world. [redacted]

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There is some tendency to see Arab support for Palestinian terrorism as well in "anti-colonialist" terms [redacted]

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This article of faith among a number of West European intellectuals may not be held as such by many average citizens. There is nonetheless a shared conviction among both leaders and voters that there can be no peace in the Middle East and no solution to the terrorist problem until the Palestinian issue is resolved. West European leaders are not so naive as to believe that Qadhafi or Khomeini would be any less revolutionary or that Assad would be any less treacherous if there were a Palestinian homeland. They are convinced, however, that such a solution would sharply reduce the numbers of radically aggrieved Palestinians who now float around the Middle East providing radical Arab leaders with too many ready tools. [redacted]

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We believe it is the West Europeans' optimistic view of the short-term impact of a Palestinian state on Middle Eastern terrorism that leads them to conclude that the US focus on terrorism is myopic. They argue that Washington is only attacking the symptom and that the United States must turn its attention to the Palestinian origins of the problem if it is to succeed. By this, West Europeans mean that Washington must persuade or coerce Israel into accepting the formation of a Palestinian state in which the PLO would play a leading role. Indeed, some West Europeans almost certainly worry that Washington's new activism in combating Middle Eastern terrorism has made it an unwitting instrument of Israeli foreign policy [redacted]. They probably believe that joining in US military or economic pressure on terrorist-supporting states would actually

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make it harder over the long term to deal with what they regard as one of the principal roots of the terrorist problem. [REDACTED]

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A final factor in Western Europe's different perception of terrorism is its own experience with homegrown revolutionaries and urban guerrillas in the 1970s and early 1980s. The domestic terrorist problem persists, but most West Europeans are convinced that the worst is behind them. They credit their success to effective police action, public safety precautions, and the terrorists' own growing sense of futility with their causes, and they believe that the same path could be followed in fighting Middle Eastern terrorism. In our opinion, however, they fail to recognize that they did not make much progress against their domestic terrorists until they effectively declared war on them, and that lapse of memory prevents them from drawing a parallel conclusion in the West's confrontation with state-sponsored terrorism today. [REDACTED]

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Differences in International Roles: Western Europe's Insularity versus Washington's Global View

A still more basic ingredient in European reluctance to support US policy toward Libya is the growth in Eurocentrism. Since the loss of overseas empire, many of the separate West European states have turned inward and lost much of their former sense of global mission. This basic shift in world position has led to an equally basic shift in their perception of the Atlantic Alliance. In the 1940s and 1950s, the West Europeans sought Washington's help in beating back indigenous challenges to their overseas colonies. Now, more than two decades after the loss of their last important imperial holdings, the West Europeans insist that the Alliance's objective is to safeguard Western Europe's security--not to stand up for democratic values and Western interests in other parts of the world. Insularity in the EC and EFTA has been highly profitable, giving rise to the paradox that Western Europe has become more parochial at the same time that it has grown richer and stronger--and less deferential to the United States. [REDACTED]

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In this respect, many of the factors influencing Western Europe's response to terrorism are reflected in European attitudes on East-West issues. West Europeans have grown complacent about the threat of communism--either the domestic or the Soviet varieties--and they have been generally content to pursue detente with the East Bloc without worrying about Soviet subversion in other parts of the world. Their relatively mild reaction to all but the most bloody terrorist attacks contrasts with their strong condemnation of the US raid in much the same way as their muted responses to Soviet interventions in Afghanistan and Poland differed from their resistance to US pressure to reduce their dependence on the Soviet pipeline. Unless West Europeans are directly threatened themselves, they are far more likely to be unsettled by US calls for collective action against terrorist or communist wrongs than they are by those wrongs themselves. [REDACTED]

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Changing perceptions of the Alliance are a final factor explaining why the West Europeans take so narrow a view of their responsibilities as members of the Atlantic Alliance. Many in the older generation have lived under the umbrella of US protection for so long that they have come to see it as theirs by right without any corollary responsibilities on their part. The ever expanding majority of West European voters born since 1945 have no first-hand experience of the circumstances that contributed to NATO's birth; many in this group doubt that the Soviets pose a threat. Others in the group believe that the real danger to their welfare is what they call the arms race between Washington and Moscow and that US determination to resist Soviet global pretensions could drag Western Europe into an East-West conflagration. A small but growing number of younger voters has even come to accept Soviet propaganda that US pursuit of Western military preparedness is the principal threat to peace. [REDACTED]

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All of these concerns are heightened because two World Wars fought on European soil this century and numerous colonial struggles lost after 1945 have made West Europeans skeptical

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about the costs and efficacy of military action and cynical about the role of morality in international affairs. The upheavals of the 20th century have also given their political life a strong pacifist undertow. These negative attitudes have already combined to scupper Allied support for US military action beyond Western Europe's borders. Over time, they could undermine support for collective security in Western Europe itself.

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### Current Differences over Tactics

Despite these underlying fundamental differences of view, the dispute between Western Europe and the United States over policy toward Libya has been argued out so far on a tactical level, focusing on whether military force is an effective means of combating terrorism and whether economic sanctions are workable. Many European leaders almost certainly also shared the perception of their publics that the raid would be counterproductive--that it would provoke a bloodbath of terrorist retaliation, force the moderate Arabs to rally around Qadhafi, drive all of them closer to the Soviet Union, and jeopardize West European economic interests in the Middle East. Fear that striking Qadhafi's hive would only stir up terrorist wasps to sting the nearest bystanders--Western Europe, not the United States--probably overwhelmed any recognition of how much West European passivity might encourage Qadhafi and other state sponsors of terrorism to continue their efforts.

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West European leaders continue to worry that military retaliation against Libya will escalate if Washington becomes embroiled in a mounting cycle of violence with Tripoli. Indeed US accusations against Syria sparked fears that a military campaign against Libyan terrorism will expand into conflict with Syria and Iran, drawing in both the Soviet Union and the rest of the Arab world. If this did occur, the West Europeans would then face an extremely difficult choice--either fall in behind the United States and alienate their own voters or stand aloof and jeopardize US support for the defense of Western Europe.

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West Europeans also worry that participation in economic sanctions against Libya will invite Libyan retaliation. In any case, they oppose sanctions as a matter of principle, contending that history shows they do not work and arguing that there are always countries that will take advantage of boycotts to beat others out of lucrative commercial ties. By and large, the Europeans have found quiet diplomatic efforts (and, occasionally,

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[redacted]

private accommodation) to be more effective than public threats--which in their mind, expose them to humiliation if they fail. [redacted]

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Given these disagreements, Washington is likely to continue meeting resistance when it presses for military action or economic sanctions against Middle Eastern terrorism. We believe, however, that the Europeans may be amenable to some arguments for enhanced cooperation. Most fundamentally, West European leaders are still too unsure of their ability to stand alone to risk a major break with Washington, and they will probably remain so for some years to come. Moreover, there are signs that the wide disparity in public opinion on each side of the Atlantic toward the US strike worried many Europeans and probably increased public backing for the limited anti-Libyan measures their leaders adopted to placate Washington. [redacted]

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For the medium term at least, we believe Washington will be able to continue squeezing a modicum of support from West European leaders partly with reminders that the alternative may be further military strikes, and partly with hints of how much Alliance solidarity on this or that particular point means to Washington. [redacted]

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In particular, Europeans are likely to look more favorably on economic and diplomatic measures against Libya now that they know the alternative may be further military strikes. Several leaders have already expressed willingness to expand on the tentative steps already taken, especially if Libya is implicated in further terrorist attacks. Appeals to West European leaders for support,

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however, are likely to wear less and less well if public opinion continues its long-term drift in the other direction and if little progress is made toward resolving key West European concerns about relations with moderate Arabs. [REDACTED]

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### Implications for the United States

West European leaders have papered over some of the chasm between their countries and Washington with the anti-terrorist measures they implemented after 15 April, and West European voters, too, may be looking at US anti-terrorist policy a little more dispassionately than they did during their first negative kneejerk reaction. The fact remains that differences persist over how to deal with Middle Eastern terrorism and that, more seriously, these tactical differences overlay more basic and growing divisions of international perspective and interest between the Allies and the United States. This larger process of deterioration can still be stopped, but not unless West European political leaders speak out with courage and conviction on the reasons their countries should continue to support both the Atlantic Alliance and the United States. [REDACTED]

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**SUBJECT: Western Europe-United States: Differences over Policy  
Toward Libya Highlight Deeper Splits within the  
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